



Institute for American Studies
Leipzig University
Author Manuscript

© 2015. This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Published in its final edited form as:

Herrmann, Sebastian M. “Foggy Realisms? Fiction, Nonfiction, and Political Affect in Larry Beinhart’s *Fog Facts* and *The Librarian*.” *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann et al. Heidelberg: Winter, 2015. 133-51. Print.

Foggy Realisms? Fiction, Nonfiction, and Political Affect in Larry Beinhart's *Fog Facts* and *The Librarian*

Abstract: This paper reads Larry Beinhart's novel *The Librarian* (2004) and its nonfiction companion *Fog Facts* (2005) as a double attempt at writing that is politically invested in representing reality but that nevertheless is openly aware of the postmodern crisis of representation. In this sense, I read both books as indicative of a broad cultural search for forms of writing that engage their readers' reality without simply attempting to return to a less complicated moment before postmodernism. The paper situates both books within crucial textual contexts: a broad 'epistemic panic' about the facts and reality at the time, a surge of political nonfiction published in response to George W. Bush's Presidency, and a longer tradition of political fiction. Tracing how the novel struggles with its nonfiction aspects and how the nonfiction book relies on fiction to make its point, I then look at how the two books evoke political affect to have a realist appeal of sorts despite their insistence on the precarious nature of all realist representation. Reading both books as distinctly popular, mass-market products and thus bringing together the debate around post-postmodernism from literary studies with an interest in reading pleasures informed by popular culture studies, I argue that the two books constitute decidedly popular attempts at a new, meta-aware yet politically engaged textuality.

Introduction

Reviewing nine contemporary books for the *New York Times* in 2004, critic Caryn James notes a particular textual dynamic in these texts that manifests in how they, "like many other current political fictions, [...] take a skewed approach to realities too fraught to face head-on" (B29). In her review, James discusses a broad range of authors and formats (from the well-established, serious novelist Philip Roth to the pop culture icon Jon Stewart, from novels to graphic novels to a "goofy mock history textbook" [B29]), and this breadth suggests that these "current political fictions" illustrate a broad textual phenomenon that traverses boundaries of genre, mode, media, and audience. Moreover, James's review characterizes this emerging landscape of "current political fictions" as marked by a new 'realism' that is difficult to pin down. Interested in how these texts constitute "fantasies that lead to a kind of superrealism," she notes that, paradoxically, these texts, which are about political realities, nevertheless constitute "nonrealistic political fictions" and that the in-betweenness of their mode, their "superrealism," marks them as particularly "current" (B29). Tellingly

blurring the books' (super)realism and their 'realistic' qualities, she observes: "Genuinely realistic novels about the politics of the early 21st century probably require more historical distance than novelists have now, but those books are certainly coming" (B29).

This paper will take James's review as a point of departure to discuss two recent political texts, one novel and one nonfiction book, and to investigate in how far they do project a particular form of (new) realism. The question is important because James's reference to "a kind of superrealism" (B29) dovetails with recent discussions of literature after postmodernism, discussions that not only often diagnose contemporary literature's renewed desire "to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives" (McLaughlin 55) but that frequently tie this rediscovered 'politicality' to a return to some version of realism.¹ Notably, in these debates, realism seems to refer not simply to the literary mode or epoch. Instead, it serves as a presumably commonsensical counterpoint to an alleged postmodern (meta)textual narcissism, and it seems to draw its explanatory appeal more from this function—from emphatically pointing away from text and toward reality—than from having any clearly circumscribed meaning. In this sense, 'realism' serves to evoke a text's ability to refer to actual reality, its referentiality—a facet of meaning that is rather removed from 'realism' understood as a mode or epoch.² Scholarly debates around post-postmodernism typically tend to read this renewed desire for social relevance as an important artistic project advanced primarily in the 'serious' texts of 'serious' authors, at times even developed in express opposition against the spreading-out of postmodernism into popular culture. However, looking for how popular, mass-market-oriented texts project particular forms of realism allows to read post-postmodern textuality as a broad cultural concern, not an elite discourse, within the contemporary moment.

Accordingly, this paper will take one text from James's list, Larry Beinhart's *The Librarian*, together with its nonfiction pendant, *Fog Facts* by the same author, and will argue that these two texts can be read as projecting a particular, complex, and precarious form of realism in the sense outlined above. In this, I am interested in how these books make an effort of speaking of their readers' reality without simply denying the problematic status of facts and in how this project, clearly located 'after postmodernism,' ties in with their status as popular texts that must offer particular reading pleasures to their audience. For both, I will show, the political quality of the texts' subject matter is crucial: Notably, both texts insert themselves into

1 Cf. the introduction of this volume for more on these "various brands of 'realism'" (13).

2 Thus, in James's review, the texts under discussion are, on the one hand, "nonrealistic political fictions"—they are not meant to be believed literally—but they nevertheless derive their "superrealism" from speaking of actual political realities (B29).

textual environments marked by negotiations of realness, representation, and politics, and I will use a first section to situate them with regard to these environments. In a second section, I will then look at the difficulties both books encounter as they try to pursue two contradictory goals at once: In that they want to speak of actual politics, political elections in their readers' lived reality, they claim to represent reality. At the same time, their main concern is the political fallout of the postmodern crisis of representation, the extent to which facts, reality, and representation have become problematic concepts in themselves. This condition, of course, constitutes a major obstacle for any project attempting to realistically speak of contemporary politics, and both books struggle to overcome this obstacle. In a final section, I will thus look at how the two texts use political affect, rather than an ideal of transparent representation, to project a form of metarealism (or "superrealism," in James's phrasing [B29]) that both is explicitly aware of the crisis of representation and that nevertheless attempts to speak of and to its readers' reality. Ultimately, both books, in how they align with the genres of political fiction and political nonfiction, respectively, speak of realism—understood as the ability of representations to reference reality. Both, at the same time, perform a realist project of sorts; yet both are highly conflicted about such realist representation. For Beinhart's two books, then, the poetics of politics constitute a realm in which a particular attempt at a new meta-aware realism can unfold and where this attempt finds popular resonance.

Texts and Contexts: *The Librarian*, *Fog Facts*, and Political (Non)Fiction

Before approaching *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts* in more detail, I will use this section to first briefly present the two primary texts and to contextualize them within three different textual environments that, I will argue, are all marked by negotiations of realness, representation, and politics. Beinhart's two books, I will thus show, insert themselves into a discussion about reality, facts, and representation in politics that peaked around the time of their publication. In addition, they engage two different (mass-)publication markets: a vivid landscape of nonfiction books on the misdoings of the Bush administration and a longer, distinctly US American tradition of political fiction.

Larry Beinhart's *The Librarian* is a novel about a large-scale conspiracy to steal the US presidential election that, in its characters and setting, is closely mapped on the historical moment of its publication, the US presidential election of 2004.³ The book features a Bush-like president, a

3 Beinhart is known primarily for his earlier piece of political fiction, *American Hero*, which was heavily rewritten into the feature film *Wag the Dog*. For a reading

presidential aide openly modeled as a Karl Rove/Dick Cheney mash-up, and a Democratic contender whose characterization implicitly evokes both Hillary Clinton and John Kerry: a female politician with real-life war experience (albeit as a nurse, not a swift-boat commander). In the book, a college librarian incidentally gets implicated in a right-wing conspiracy to manipulate the election and, not least because he simply tries to stay alive, uncovers the conspiracy just in time for the election. This plot serves as a vehicle to talk about a more fundamental epistemic dilemma that underwrites the social and political status quo in the book: the problem that facts do not seem to have the kind of realness and impact they once used to have. To make this point, the novel introduces the notion of fog facts, facts that are known but that, because they have not been properly textualized, fail to have the impact facts are expected to have. As the novel puts in one of its longer explanatory passages: “They are known, but not known” at the same time (64).⁴ Since the fictional universe of the novel is so closely mapped on the historical and political landscape of the United States of 2004, the book suggests that this problem—the power of such latent fog facts and the difficulty of recuperating them, of turning them into actual, manifest facts—is a central political problem of the real US’s political and social condition of 2004 as well: “In the information age there is so much information that sorting and focus and giving the appropriate weight to anything have become incredibly difficult” (63). This, then, is also where, according to the novel’s basic tenet, the librarian comes in as a protagonist: Schooled in reading, researching, and categorizing, he is the only one able to penetrate the fog of fog facts and to find out the truth.

Obviously, Beinhart’s *Fog Facts* similarly deals with the eponymous fog facts, but it approaches the subject matter from a nonfiction perspective, thus speaking more directly about how these facts and their delicate epistemic status—their being known and not known at the same time—impacts the historical and political moment its readers live in. The book was published immediately after *The Librarian*, and this publication context gives it the air of being an addendum, a companion volume to the original novel.

that compares *American Hero* and *The Librarian* and aligns the former with full-fledged postmodernism, the latter with an ‘exhausted,’ post-postmodern condition, cf. my “Narrating the ‘Crisis of Representation’: The Cultural Work of Conspiracy in Larry Beinhart’s Novels on the Bush Presidencies” (Herrmann, “Narrating”).

- 4 Notably, the fog facts are introduced with respect to the fictional president’s war record, which is just like the real president’s: Like George W. Bush, the novel’s Augustus W. Scott avoided combat in the Vietnam War by enlisting in a National Guard unit that served in the US. With both presidents, this fact was “not a secret[,] [i]t was known,” but for both, this knowledge had no impact (63). Especially in the context of John Kerry’s unsuccessful bid for the Presidency, left-leaning commentators were frustrated that public perception saw Kerry, who had extensive combat experience from Vietnam, as less of a warrior than Bush, who had shied away from military service abroad.

The book itself is a comparatively loose collection of different short essays, most of them on contemporary politics, some on propaganda, some on advertising and its role in creating a hegemonic consensus in society, some on literature, and some on conversations the author/narrator had had about these matters with others. It spans a total of eleven chapters and comes with a short nine-page index. The index, in my reading, is not simply a genre marker of the nonfiction book. It also signals an intended (inter)active readership, as does the publication of a nonfiction companion to a fiction novel more generally. The audience both books interpellate is a distinctly literate, bibliophilic one that, reading one book on a subject matter, will actively seek out related books and additional information on the topic.⁵ Despite their differences, then, both *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts* partake in the same textual project: Both books, on their surface, are engaged in a didactic project that wants to educate their readers about the concept of fog facts and about the fog facts' impact on the US political system, an aspect I will explore in more depth in a later section.

Both books are informed by three different textual environments, and I will use the next few paragraphs to briefly outline these environments. First, in how they tie together questions of politics with questions of factuality, (un)reality, and medial/textual representation, both books are borne of a distinct 'epistemic panic' among large parts of the American public at the time, a "panic sense" (Hutcheon 23) that the Bush administration had found ways of bypassing reality.⁶ This view was expressed most succinctly in a widely received piece by Ron Suskind in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2004. In it, Suskind ventilates the concern that the Bush administration had left behind the "reality-based community" of journalists and historians, that Bush and his aides had somehow become able to "create [their] own reality," and that this ability to create an unreal, artificial reality had paved the way to the Presidency, to empire, and to war. Even though the entirety of the article was about the role of faith for the administration, it was this notion of reality as having become decoupled from facts and being subject to the creative capabilities of those in power that hit a nerve. It reflected a widespread concern over the malleability of what counts for the 'real,' which sat center stage in US discussions of politics at the time. As political scientist Diane Rubenstein puts it, it thus corresponded to a larger discursive trend in which the semiotic "category of the 'real' and its putative

5 As anecdotal yet exemplary evidence of how the book encourages this reading practice, cf. this *Amazon* customer review, which was once also paratextually published on the (now defunct) website of Beinhart's nonfiction book: "I read [*Fog Facts*] together with Noam Chomsky's *Imperial Ambitions* [...] interviews, and the two complement one another" (Steele Vivas).

6 The 'American public' here obviously does not refer to simply the population of the US but to the body of published opinion at the time, to public discourse, and thus to a vaguely Habermasian notion of the civic/bourgeois public sphere (cf. Habermas).

erasure or endangerment [...] [had] increasingly become an object of concern in our political culture today” (11). Both *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts* thus pick up an existing, vivid discourse about the artificial fabrication of ‘reality’ in politics at the time.⁷

Secondly, apart from this larger discursive landscape, both books—and particularly *Fog Facts*—must be read in the context of an impressive proliferation of other politics-oriented nonfiction books that criticized the Presidency (and that often did so by speaking about the administration’s tenuous relationship to truth and reality), many of them rushed to the market to meet urgent demand. From Al Franken’s rather direct *Lies: And the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* to Mark Crispin Miller’s more tongue-in-cheek *The Bush Dyslexicon*, from Douglas Kellner’s focus on the beginning of the Presidency in *Grand Theft 2000* to Frank Rich’s more retrospective *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush’s America*, throughout the eight years of the Bush administration, book after book appeared that lambasted the President and his aides—often but not always for misrepresenting the true facts (about 9/11, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, Enron, or anything else) to the American public.⁸ Indeed, as John Powers remarks in a review of Frank Rich’s book: By 2006, the intended readers could already “recite the long list of Administration malfeasances like fans at a Neil Diamond concert singing along with ‘Sweet Caroline.’” Yet, to Powers, these books do point at an important dilemma:

After years of shrieking about postmodern relativism in the modern university, especially its literature departments, today’s conservatives now embrace the same thing when it comes to politics. Talk about breaking the connection between signifiers and referents. With his disdain for ‘reality-based’ behavior, Karl Rove makes Jacques Derrida seem as stodgy as Andy Rooney.

Notably, like the book he reviews, Powers here ties the current political situation to the postmodern condition, arguing that the Bush administration had perversely adopted postmodernism’s once progressive and antiestablishment tenet of the end of reality to realize its own ideological principles. In this way, the article, published in the *Nation*, gives evidence of how the debate about postmodernism had spread out into public discourse about politics at the time and of how this spreading-out marked a moment of crisis of the postmodern project noted inside and outside of academia.

7 This epistemic panic peaked during the George W. Bush Presidency, but it has a longer tradition in American culture that can be traced back at least to the Nixon Presidency. For a historicizing analysis of this discourse and its cultural work, cf. my book *Presidential Unrealities: Epistemic Panic, Cultural Work, and the US Presidency* (Herrmann, *Presidential*).

8 For a more detailed reading of Frank Rich’s book, cf. my article “‘Ruled by Fiction?’ ‘Real’ Deception and Narrative Truth in Frank Rich’s *The Greatest Story Ever Sold* (2006)” (Herrmann, “Ruled”).

Perhaps most tellingly, however, Powers's article underscores that these nonfiction books constitute a popular genre that, precisely in its nonfiction perspective, offers pleasures (and even fan practices) similar to popular culture—a first hint at the role of affect in the reading of these texts, which I will come back to below.

Thirdly, while both *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts* were thus released against this backdrop of a soaring market of nonfiction Bush bashings, Beinhart's novel aligns with the tradition of political fiction, a genre that is often claimed to be distinctly US American and that is, already by way of its subject matter, marked by a precarious realism.⁹ Indeed, discussions of the genre often focus on its complex realism—understood, again, not as a literary mode or epoch but as having to do more tangibly with a text's relationship to reality. These discussions cross disciplinary divides and are led by both political scientists and literary studies scholars. They are fueled by a shared interest in such realism, and the interdisciplinary attraction of the term further expands its potential meanings: Coming from a political science background, James F. Davidson thus highlights political fiction's ability to “remind us of the extent to which we fictionalize in all analysis” (860). Furthermore, Lee Sigelman points out, as a particular value of popular fiction generally, its ability to serve as a “prism” of reality that can provide important insights for political scientists precisely because of its realism (155), whose particular verisimilitude condenses (political) realities. Conversely, writing from a literary studies perspective, J. E. Vacha similarly focuses his discussion of political fiction on the genre's relationship to historical realities and suggests to distinguish political fiction's subgenres by their various forms of referentiality.¹⁰ In both political science

9 In a seminal work on *Politics and the Novel*, Irving Howe defines the political novel somewhat redundantly as “a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting” (17). Not surprisingly, the genre's exact parameters thus are difficult to pin down. As George von der Muhll remarks, there are “many unresolved questions,” among them the question of what qualifies as ‘political’ in a novel (23). On the distinctly American quality of the genre, note how the German political science scholar Hans J. Kleinsteuber introduces it to a German audience as something foreign and almost exotic: “As a political scientist, I am aware of the genre of political fiction that has a long and impressive tradition in the US, the oldest modern democracy. These novels play out against a political backdrop, but they nevertheless feature suspense, drama, and even comical moments” (211; my translation).

10 Vacha suggests three different categories of political fiction, each corresponding to a different form of referentiality: the utopian novel, characterized by a “more imaginative” approach; a “realistic approach, which aspires to an accurate portrayal” of political institutions; and the political scenario novel, which extrapolates from real political situations (196). Already the “realistic approach” does allow for some creative license: It is usually set “in and around real institutions and places, though its characters generally are fictitious or, as in the *roman à clef*, thinly disguised public figures. Since the aim is for verisimilitude, the events must be believ-

and literary studies, discussions of political fiction thus gravitate toward discussions of realism and referentiality, sometimes triggering an acute concern for the distinction between fact and fiction that then sets off all kinds of genre troubles. As George von der Muhll laments, as late as 1992, semifictional genres have already become widely accepted in other fields: In the context of political fiction, “[d]ocudramas and historical novels no longer seem oxymorons” (24).

Beinhart’s two books about fog facts thus engage three different textual environments that all speak of the relationship between reality, representation, and politics: a widespread and vivid public discourse on the manufacturing of reality by the Bush administration; a soaring market of nonfiction books about this Presidency and its lies and other misdoings; and the genre of political fiction, which is traditionally marked by a complex and ambivalent realism.

Incompletenesses, Supplements, and Realisms

Inserting themselves into these debates and consciously engaging this particular intersection of reality, representation, and politics, *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts* are in themselves precarious and, I will argue, necessarily incomplete projects. Specifically, both books pursue different attempts at speaking about the political realities at the time while simultaneously diagnosing that ‘reality’ has become a problematic category in itself. In this, they encounter limitations that they are unable to overcome and that make them rely on their respective other as a supplement to their own project. This orientation of the novel toward nonfiction and of the nonfiction book toward fiction creates telling fissures between a foregrounding of referentiality and a foregrounding of intertextual or metatextual gestures. I will use this section to discuss these fault lines in the novel and the nonfiction book before using the next section to trace their potential for pointing at a particular form of realism.

In the review cited before, James remarks that Beinhart “is better at imagining outrageous plots that slyly allude to current politics than he is at describing characters or situations” (B29). Indeed, there is some merit to the observation: As a novel, *The Librarian* is not a particularly deep or well-developed piece. A veritable page-turner, its fast-paced plot offers great suspense, but the characters are overdrawn and accordingly lack in subtlety, contradictions, or complexity, the metaphors often are compara-

able” (196). The relationship to reality, then, is more complex in the other two. While “[t]he events [...] in the realistic novel are meant to be believed[,] those in the utopian novel [are meant] to be feared or hoped for. Events portrayed in the scenario novel are meant to be acted or reacted upon; it is the propaganda vehicle *par excellence*” (200).

tively predictable, and the “situations,” as James calls them, are only a vehicle to the larger plot development. These particularities may be due to the need to complete the novel in time for the election, be it for commercial or for political reasons, and they might also be related to the novel’s genre affiliation.¹¹ More tellingly, however, they may well point to a relationship between the weakness of the character of the librarian—the book’s failure to come up with a deep, round person—and problems in the novel’s overall narrative project: The book wants to make the point that only a librarian can confront the fog of facts, but in the course of the novel, its lead character suddenly turns into a James Bond-like spy, and his ability to unravel the mystery ultimately has more to do with his skills at fighting and spying than with his more bibliophilic powers.¹² In the end, the unrealistic “James Bonding” (261) hijacks the book, whose larger project of introducing the fog of facts and of imagining a way of confronting them gets lost in the drive of the narrative.¹³ This hijacking, in turn, reflects the difficulties of utilizing the underlying conceptual framework for the telling of a story: While there is a long ‘iconoclastic’ tradition of blaming political deception on images—a framework in which a Gutenberg Galaxy-oriented librarian indeed is the right man for the job of recuperating reality—there hardly are preestablished conceptual resources of narrating the end of facts in an authoritative way, a project that necessarily gets complicated by how any narrative of the end of reality inherently threatens to invalidate its own authority as well.¹⁴ The imaginative work of the novel, it seems, cannot come up with a character that is able to believably counter this threat, and it thus reverts to the moral fantasies of a James Bond-like spy, a solution outside of the realities of the Bush administration it wants to speak about.

If the hijacking of the novel by the James Bond narrative thus apparently keeps its nonfictional, referential, and political project from fully unfolding, its nonfiction companion *Fog Facts* conversely relies on a

- 11 Cf. Vacha’s list of frequent “shortcomings” of this “hybrid genre” of the political scenario novel: a “clumsiness of expression which seems to be a hereditary disease of the genre” as well as overly long dialogues and a “tendency [...] to overdo the characterizations and actions to the point of lapsing into satire or parody” (205).
- 12 Notably, in one of the comparatively few metatextual references, the protagonist does comment on this aspect: “Logic and reason had long ago gone out the window. So I knew I had to throw myself into James Bonding” (261).
- 13 Ironically, this hijacking of the book is literalized inside the novel when the protagonist takes over a taxi at gunpoint, forcing the driver to help him escape. As for the genre implications of this kidnapping, note how the cabdriver confesses to be “a reader,” a condition akin to a minority identity in the novel’s fictional universe (286).
- 14 On this notion of an “[i]conoclastic critique,” cf. Jon Simons, who, based on W. J. T. Mitchell’s terminology, diagnoses a discursive tradition of lambasting the rise of deceptive ‘images’ in political discourse (175). Simons argues that this discourse is fostered by intellectuals who have significant “cultural capital invested in typographic culture” (175).

supplement to make its point. Here, the conventions of nonfiction fail to provide the necessary resources for the story Beinhart wants to tell. Early on in the book, right after introducing the notion of fog facts, Beinhart thus quotes, of all things, from his own novel to prove his point. Reminiscing about how he first came across fog facts, he recounts the writing process for the novel as evidence. Looking for a name for the facts that nobody seemed to notice, he recalls his curiosity that these

were all public facts. They were in print. They had been referred to, reviewed, and cross-referenced elsewhere.

Yet they seemed to be invisible.

I was working on a novel about an election like the one coming up in 2004. It seemed to me that the struggle to pull some of these facts out of the fog [...] would be central to the real campaign. Therefore, they had to be central to the campaign in the book, where it was described this way:

“... Fog Facts.

That is, it was not a secret. It was known. But it was not known. That is, if you asked a knowledgeable journalist, or political analyst, or historian, they knew about it.” (3)

The quote from *The Librarian* goes on for eighteen more lines and constitutes the (preliminary) end point of the attempt to explain what fog facts are. After the quote ends, Beinhart changes the subject and speaks about the purpose of *Fog Facts*, the book, without further attempting to explain what fog facts, the epistemically anomalous category, are.

Yet it is not only the fog facts that force Beinhart to rely on fiction. Working to give his readers a sense of what ‘real’ facts are in opposition to fog facts, he refers to the TV show *Dragnet*, a series whose moral fantasy about the solidity of facts he ironically notices but never reflects as problematic in itself. Discussing in how far the official 9/11 report had failed to provide a factually correct assessment, Beinhart explains:

“Just the facts, ma’am,” Sergeant Joe Friday used to say on *Dragnet*, the weekly TV show. Each episode, they told us, was taken from the actual files of the Los Angeles Police Department. A crime had been committed. The police came. They investigated. They found the facts. Those elemental, hard, and singular truths.

The criminal was arrested and tried and, invariably, convicted. Based on the facts. At the end of the show, they announced the sentence that had been handed down. Twenty-two minutes, and the world was returned to order.

[...]

The failure of the 9/11 report is [...] basic [...]. It fails to do what Sergeant Joe Friday would have done. Get “the facts, ma’am, just the facts.” (7-9)

This reliance on fiction to explain, of all things, what facts ‘really’ are is doubly ironic: First, in its nostalgic reference to a 1950s police procedural that made authenticity a major objective of its narrative project, it underscores the extent to which the idea of facts as “elemental, hard, and singular

truths” has become openly nostalgic to begin with, something that can be reliably established only by thinking about fiction.¹⁵ Such a romanticization of “hard, [...] singular” facts, secondly, is accompanied by a number of factual errors that reviewers have pointed out as hurting the book’s overall credibility and as thus making it fail by the standards of nonfiction.¹⁶ Indeed, it is other nonfiction books that led reviewers to conclude that

[a]t bottom, I agree with much of what Beinhart says. Yet stronger works exist. Joe Conason’s *Big Lies*, Craig Unger’s *House of Bush, House of Saud*, and the more contemporaneous *The Truth (with jokes)* by Al Franken come to mind. In the final analysis, readers are better served by such books than this one. (“Book Review”)

In other words, *Fog Facts*, this anonymous reviewer finds, does not compare well to the other books in the soaring Bush-bashing market mentioned above, and one of the reasons for this shortcoming lies in how it fails to fully conform to the genre requirements of the nonfiction book—with factual accuracy, even in minor details, being one of them.

In addition, *Fog Facts*’ particular incompleteness moves center stage in a passage in which Beinhart attempts to describe the book’s overall purpose and its intended function. In his description, thick with epistemic metaphors, *Fog Facts* notably is not a completed project but a journey:

I live in the country. Sometimes the fog is so thick that you don’t even know where you are. If you’re driving, the beams from your headlights just bounce back at you. Then, as you go around a corner or the elevation changes, up or down, you emerge from the fog and suddenly everything is clear and you say to yourself, ah-hah, that’s where we are.

This book is a journey somewhat like that. It’s not a catalog of “fog facts.” Nor is it a thesis. That they are caused by a single thing and this is what we should do to cure it. It touches on several issues, politics, the media, economics, the Bush administration, 9/11, and the 9/11 Report among them. A multitude of books have been written about each. Where that is the case, I saw no point in duplicating those fine efforts. Rather this is a journey in search of those moments where we

- 15 Beinhart first takes this argument in a different direction, suggesting that, in the aftermath of 9/11, “with all the turmoil and panic,” the Bush administration had attempted to present to the American public a similarly speedy return to order: “In two days the FBI announced the names of eighteen hijackers and a day later amended the list to add one more” (7). Over the following two pages, however, this argument loses focus and ends up suggesting that the 9/11 report should have presented the kinds of facts we know from *Dragnet* (9).
- 16 For a list of factual mistakes, cf. “Book Review.” In a further (most likely unintentional) ironic twist, Beinhart’s recollection that Sergeant Friday used to say “Just the facts, ma’am” (7) on *Dragnet* happens to be one such factual error. The phrase was coined by a 1953 spoof of the TV series and is already a condensation of the more lengthy, less catchy ways in which the series’ lead character asked people to focus on the facts (cf. Rozelle 46).

come around the corner, or go down low, or rise up high, and see some particular thing or some series of events that allows us to say, “Oh, that’s where we are.” (4)

The difficulties the text encounters in expressing its own project, of course, are telling. Rather than clearly defining positively, it resorts to a metaphor that it then does not fully subscribe to—the book is “a journey somewhat like that”—and where it does attempt to name its function and genre more specifically, it can only speak in negatives: “It’s not a catalog [...]. Nor is it a thesis.” The “fog” that envelops the country here first and foremost speaks of the epistemic difficulty of retaining a sense of reality in a society dominated by “fog facts,” but in how it is called on (and fails) to define *Fog Facts*’ textual project, it also speaks of the foggy line between fictional and nonfictional textual forms.

Lastly, the particular incompleteness—not just of *Fog Facts* but of both books—also informs surprising moments of direct reader address in these texts. Toward the end of *The Librarian*, the narrator suddenly turns to the reader, claiming that it depends on the reader whether or not the fictional electoral fraud in the novel can be stopped: “It depends on you. Sorry about that. But it does” (431). This direct address is remarkable not only because it signifies another attempt to bridge the gap between fiction and reality but because it seems to acknowledge that there is only so much the book can do by itself. Leaving the outcome of the election up in the air, it quite literally remains incomplete, asking for the readers to contribute their share to a happy ending. Moreover, this dynamic returns at the end of *Fog Facts*, a similarly incomplete attempt at expressing the matter, with Beinhart addressing the reader: “The subject of this book is ongoing. As I write it, things are changing and I want to add and subtract. Fortunately, we are in the age of the Internet and books need not end when they end. To continue this dialog go to: fogfacts.com” (200). Despite working in different ways, in both books, the direct reader address marks a similar moment in which the text alone does not seem to suffice.

Both books, it seems, thus fail to fully complete their narrative project. *The Librarian*’s novelistic project is hampered by the conceptual framework of fog facts the book needs to relay, not only in how the explanation of this framework interrupts the narrative but also in how the need to stay on message about the fog facts makes the overall narrative vulnerable to the hijacking by the genre of spy fiction. The nonfiction companion, in turn, finds itself unable to authoritatively speak of the real facts without openly deriving its sense of factuality from a fictional idea of what facts ought to be. In both cases, the incompletenesses of the two books point to the very moment in which they try to bring together an awareness for the postmodern instability of the concept of ‘fact’ with an actual political project that matters in their readers’ lived experience.

Realism, Metarealism, or Interactive Superrealism

Rather than merely constituting artistic defects, however, the narrative moments of incompleteness I have just outlined can also be read as projecting a particular form of realism. Where the previous section worked to find and trace both books' failure to fully realize their project, this final section will propose that this failure speaks of both books' attempt at a particular form of realism and will argue that this realism lies in how they invite their readers to actualize the narrative with regard to their political reality. However, speaking from a historical moment at which any sense of a presumably transparent portrayal of reality is doubly compromised—one, because facts and reality generally have become questionable concepts, and two, because politics, the books argue, come with their own deceptive realism—the books do not simply promise a realism of transparent referentiality. Instead, their particular realism activates their implied readers' (partisan) emotions, their political affect, to encourage a mapping of the fictional on the real world, and vice versa. I will trace this dynamic by closely reading responses by two readers for whom, apparently, this particular interpellation has worked and who, in effect, have found their reading experience particularly satisfying.

In one such exemplary reader's report, Peter Block, reviewing *The Librarian* for *Penthouse*, thus praises the novel by comparing it, curiously, not against other novels but against the market of political nonfiction described above: "I love it. So much better than the 'non fiction' Bush bashes" (qtd. in *Librarian*). This positive assessment is important for a number of reasons: By writing "'non fiction'" in single quotation marks, Block explicitly acknowledges that even nonfiction books are a tricky genre to begin with; they, too, are not simply not fiction. More importantly, in measuring the book's relative merits in relation to the market of Bush-bashing nonfiction, Block doubly highlights affect and aligns with one another two distinct emotional responses—the loving of the novel and the bashing of the President. In this, his comment points toward a particular reading practice that looks for pleasure exactly in how a text engages the real political situation in a partisan way. Read thus, the book's gestures toward its implied readers' reality are an enabling factor for a particular, affect-driven reception practice. These gestures matter not so much because they transport accurate information about politics or history but because they invite a particular form of engaged reading, a distinct form of immersion that does not work by submersion in a fictional world but by mapping on one another the fictional universe and the lived political/social reality of the reader and enabling a free transfer of affect from one to another. The readers that *The Librarian* interpellates are thus invited to carry over their partisan engagement in contemporary politics into the fictional universe, and they, conversely, are encouraged to relate the storyworld to their per-

ception of politics. It is in this transfer that both the novel's particular feeling of 'realness' and its reading pleasures reside.

Indeed, Block's short assessment is not the only indicator of such complex reading dynamics surrounding the novel's referential gestures and relying on a particularly mobile reading position. In a letter to the author, another reader explains:

Dear Larry.....

I just finished reading *The Librarian*. And, interestingly enough, I was in Barcelona on the night of our first Presidential debate (which was only available on European TV at 3:00am – so I missed it) while reading of the debate between Scott and Murphy.....(I hope the debate later this week will have an equally powerful ZAP!!! – we need it!) (qtd. in Houghton)¹⁷

What makes this letter particularly intriguing is, again, the agility with which this reader goes back and forth between the fictional world inside the book and the real one in which actual elections take place, an agility that is the result not least of her partisan affect. In its brevity and expressive syntactic style, her letter gives evidence of the permeability of the reality-fiction divide in her appropriation of the text and of a dazzling array of different levels and experiences she pulls together in the process: She relates her personal experience of being in Barcelona to the political event of the first presidential debate, and she connects both to the way in which her regret of having missed the real debate is mitigated by her reading about a fictional one. Notably, she highlights the fact—"interestingly enough"—that she replaced or amended the real televised debate, which she missed, with the fictional one, which she 'attended,' and she seemingly hopes, seriously or not, that the transmission between reality and fiction also works the other way around: The next 'real' debate, she hopes, could have the same game-changing moment as the fictional one. Not least, she does all of that in a letter to the author, thus operating a textual genre that already conspicuously touches on the reality-fiction divide.

Both Block's remarks and this letter to the author thus give evidence of how *The Librarian* enables and invites a particular appropriation of the text by its readers. In this reception practice, readers effortlessly move between the fictional world of the novel and the real world of politics (and, in the latter example, the in-between world of the heavily staged and scripted presidential debates¹⁸). Moreover, while I did not encounter similar readers' reports for *Fog Facts*, its textual surface would indeed encourage a similar

17 The authenticity of this letter is near impossible to ascertain. Featured on a webpage that has no particular institutional credibility, it is mentioned by a user named "larry beinhart" (who may or may not be the author of this book), who claims to have received it. For my argument, authenticity makes very little difference, though, since the letter's imaginative work remains the same regardless of whether it was actually sent to Larry Beinhart, the author, or imagined by a user who chose to use the author's name.

mode of reading, particularly for readers of *The Librarian* who use the nonfiction companion as yet another encouragement to wander between the novel's fiction and their own political, social reality. In fact, the two moments of direct reader address described above—the call to become active in *The Librarian*'s fictional election and the call to amend the book in *Fog Facts*—can be read to evoke a fairly explicit interface not just between the text and its readers but between the reality that is described in the book and the reality that the readers occupy. In both cases, this imagined moment of interaction is thought to complete the books and to bring them to their end, and in both cases, the textual engagement of the readers, their completion of the respective book, is imagined as contributing to desired political ends—be they inside the fictional universe or in the readers' lived reality. In this sense, there is evidence that the inconclusive moments of incompleteness in both books point toward a particular meeting ground of referentiality, realist appeal, and affect in the context of contemporary political fiction.

This aspect, in turn, dovetails with a point Sigelman makes about political fiction more generally. Quoting Peter Prescott, he links the rise of the genre to a more general American reluctance “‘to take our fiction straight without a chaser of education.’ In the ‘Washington novel’—an ever popular genre of popular fiction—verisimilitude is of the very essence” (151). Remarkably, however, he then ties this educating ‘realism,’ expressed not least in the importance of verisimilitude, to an affective dynamic usually found in melodrama:

It is paradoxical but often true that, as has been said of melodrama in general, these tales of political intrigue in the U.S. capital simultaneously create an escape from reality (propelling the reader headlong through a breathtaking series of plot developments) and slake the reader's thirst for reality (providing a People magazine-style close-up view of Washington as it ‘really’ is). [...] This mimetic aspect is the key to the popularity and the political significance of the Washington novel. (151)¹⁹

In Sigelman's take, what matters for the political novel's realism is not simply its accuracy but its verisimilitude, its ‘felt’ referentiality—mirroring not Washington as it really is but the “magazine-style” version of how “it ‘really’ is.” This textual effect of overemphasizing realness matters because it, paradoxically, allows for a moment of escape from reality. Sigelman's

18 Note how, if it is anything like the novel, the “ZAP” (qtd. in Houghton) the reader wishes for with respect to the upcoming debate is a disruption of the scripted quality of the televised debate.

19 Note, in passing, how Sigelman also identifies the political significance with the popularity of works of political fiction. Note also how he, like Kleinsteuber above and quoting Peter Prescott, reads the need for a “‘chaser of education’” as something that is typical of a particular national characteristic, typical of how “[w]e Americans” want fiction to be (151).

remarks point to a particular poetics of political fiction in which the felt referentiality of a text is inextricably tied to its 'melodramatic' affective potential and where this intertwining of political affect and reference accounts for both the popularity and the political significance of texts as much as it is a result of the texts' 'politicality.' It is this poetic that informs both *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts*.

Obviously, 'realism' thus constitutes a central category here: central to how the books identify as political fiction and political nonfiction, respectively; central to what they say about politics; and central to how they are read. If James thus notes a "kind of superrealism" at work both in Beinhart's novel and in other "nonrealistic political fictions" that "take a skewed approach to realities too fraught to face head-on," her remarks are telling on a number of levels (B29). Clearly, and as noted above, *The Librarian* does not offer realism in the classical, literary studies sense—a mode of writing that is meant to "give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader" and that is typically implemented by foregrounding the mundane, everyday reality of (more or less) regular people and by absenting signals of the text's mediation as much as possible (Abrams and Harpham 334). Yet the novel's insistence on representing "the social world" is evident in how it gestures toward the readers' social reality, even if the identification of the novel's world with the readers' is enabled not by a particularly disinterested, transparent narrative but by the partisan emotions the text mobilizes. Similarly, *Fog Facts*' referential quality, hampered by its reliance on fiction and by its factual mistakes, is restored by the political animus it is able to invoke. This already complex realism of political writing then gets further complicated by the fact that both *The Librarian* and *Fog Facts* speak about the urgent problem of the deceptive 'realism' of contemporary politics. In effect, they thus charge both their own realist project and their subject matter, the problem of the realism of politics, with a partisan urgency that allows their implied readers to actualize and appropriate the narrative for themselves, sparking not least the imagined moments of interaction detailed above, and this particular dynamic marks the point where they promise to work out as texts.

James's tellingly vague notion of "a kind of superrealism" (B29) thus speaks of a complex realism, an attempt at a metarealism of sorts, that is situated in *The Librarian*'s and *Fog Facts*' shared textual project. Both emphatically claim to speak about their readers' reality and both, aware of how the precarious nature of concepts like 'reality' or 'fact' threatens to derail such a project, rely on mobilizing their readers' partisan emotions as a source of 'realness' that, in its felt, visceral quality, presumably stands outside of postmodern relativisms.

Conclusion

To conclude, political writing constitutes an established arena of popular culture in which the fictional and the real mix and in which representation is always already a precarious category. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that political writing should also constitute a privileged place for the search of new forms of textuality recognizing the power of language and narrative to construct realities and to ‘create’ facts while, simultaneously, insisting on their “ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives” (McLaughlin 55). For the two books at the center of this paper, the political quality of their subject matter, I have argued, is crucial because it mobilizes their implied readers’ political affect. This affect is key for mapping the fictional onto the real world (and vice versa) despite both books’ insistence that a straightforward representation of one in the other was impossible. Reading the hybrid desire for a fusion of metafictional awareness with social relevance as a post-postmodern condition and tracing it in popular texts complicates more standard notions of post-postmodernism as a movement restricted to serious writing and important novels by important post-postmodern authors. It highlights the extent to which a search for new forms of textuality, whether it goes by the name of post-postmodernism or by any other, also ‘crosses the border and closes the gap’ between popular and high culture, as Leslie Fiedler diagnosed of postmodernism. More importantly, it complicates perspectives on post-postmodernism as simply a formal response to a formal exhaustion of postmodernism and ties it to larger and broadly felt cultural shifts in American society.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. “Realism and Naturalism.” *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. Print.
- Beinhart, Larry. *American Hero*. New York: Ballantine, 1994. Print.
- . *Fog Facts: Searching for Truth in the Land of Spin*. New York: Nation, 2005. Print.
- . *The Librarian*. New York: Nation, 2004. Print.
- “Book Review: *Fog Facts* (2005).” Rev. of *Fog Facts*, by Larry Beinhart. *A Progressive on the Prairie*. N.p., 20 Dec. 2005. Web. 16 June 2013.
- Davidson, James F. “Political Science and Political Fiction.” *American Political Science Review* 55.4 (1961): 851-60. Print.
- Fiedler, Leslie. “Cross the Border – Close the Gap.” *Playboy* Dec. 1969: 151+. Print.
- Franken, Al. *Lies: And the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*. New York: Dutton, 2003. Print.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT P, 1989. Print.

- Herrmann, Sebastian M. "Narrating the 'Crisis of Representation': The Cultural Work of Conspiracy in Larry Beinhart's Novels on the Bush Presidencies." *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East: A Comparative Approach*. Ed. Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014. 179-93. Print.
- . *Presidential Unrealities: Epistemic Panic, Cultural Work, and the US Presidency*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2014. Print.
- . "'Ruled by Fiction?' 'Real' Deception and Narrative Truth in Frank Rich's *The Greatest Story Ever Sold* (2006)." *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 10 (2009): n. pag. Web. 16 July 2012.
- Houghton, Sarah. "NYT Underestimates Librarians in Book Review." *Librarian in Black*. N.p., 18 Oct. 2004. Web. 25 June 2013.
- Howe, Irving. *Politics and the Novel*. New York: Horizon, 1957. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- James, Caryn. "Laughing Instead of Screaming." *New York Times* 24 Sept. 2004: B29. Print.
- Kellner, Douglas. *Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election*. Lanham: Rowman, 2001. Print.
- Kleinstauber, Hans J. "Tom Wolfe und der Mythos vom New Journalism: Porträt eines Karrieristen im interkulturellen Vergleich." *Grenzgänger: Formen des New Journalism*. Ed. Joan Kristin Bleicher and Bernhard Pörksen. Wiesbaden: VS, 2004. 193-221. Print.
- The Librarian by Larry Beinhart* [sic]. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2014. <<http://thelibrarian.biz>>.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *sympleke* 12.1-2 (2004): 53-68. *Project Muse*. Web. 16 July 2012.
- Miller, Mark Crispin. *The Bush Dyslexicon: Observations on a National Disorder*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Print.
- Powers, John. "Not the President's Men." *Nation*. Nation, 23 Oct. 2006. Web. 30 May 2012.
- Rich, Frank. *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush's America*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Rozelle, Susan D. "Fear and Loathing in Insanity Law: Explaining the Otherwise Inexplicable *Clark v. Arizona*." *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 58.1 (2007): 19-58. Print.
- Rubenstein, Diane. *This Is Not a President: Sense, Nonsense, and the American Political Imaginary*. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Sigelman, Lee. "Taking Popular Fiction Seriously." *Whitebrook* 149-63.
- Simons, Jon. "Popular Culture and Mediated Politics: Intellectuals, Elites and Democracy." *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*. Ed. John Corner and Dick Pels. London: Sage, 2003. 171-89. Print.
- Steele Vivas, Robert David. "Makes the Case for a People's Bank-Union-Intelligence Agency." Rev. of *Fog Facts*, by Larry Beinhart. *Amazon.com*. Amazon, 23 Oct. 2005. Web. 7 Aug. 2007.
- Suskind, Ron. "Without a Doubt." *New York Times Magazine* 17 Oct. 2004: 44-51. Print.
- Vacha, J. E. "It Could Happen Here: The Rise of the Political Scenario Novel." *American Quarterly* 29.2 (1977): 194-206. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 June 2011.

von der Muhll, George. "The Political Element in Literature." Whitebrook 23-52.

Wag the Dog. Dir. Barry Levinson. New Line, 1997. Film.

Whitebrook, Maureen, ed. *Reading Political Stories: Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*. Lanham: Rowman, 1992. Print.